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ABSTRACT

This Summary of Findings examines some of the special populations that community colleges serve (including single parents, first-generation students, and students aged 40 or older), and highlights a key area of training provided by community colleges, information technology. Faces of the Future is the first national survey to include both credit and non-credit students at community colleges. This report discusses some of the preliminary findings in the areas of computer skills, student population, student growth in academic and workplace skills, and satisfaction with community colleges. Community colleges help narrow the digital divide by providing computer skills to a substantial number of students. The cost of computers for education is a major problem for 20% of students. Twenty-eight percent of the noncredit students had already attained a bachelor's degree or higher. Sixty percent of credit students responded that a major reason for taking classes at the community college was to "meet the requirements for my chosen occupation." Twenty-nine percent of the noncredit students who were unemployed and seeking work reported public assistance as a source of funds for their education. More than half of community college students are first-generation students. Eighty-three percent of credit students responded that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their community college. (VWC)

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FACES OF THE FUTURE

APRIL 2000

A PORTRAIT OF AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

ED 439 760

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# Summary Findings

***Kent A. Phillippe and Michael J. Valiga***



*FACES OF THE FUTURE* IS THE FIRST NATIONAL SURVEY TO INCLUDE BOTH CREDIT AND NONCREDIT STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES. THIS REPORT DISCUSSES SOME OF THE PRELIMINARY FINDINGS IN THE AREAS OF COMPUTER SKILLS, STUDENT POPULATION, STUDENT GROWTH IN ACADEMIC AND WORKPLACE SKILLS, AND SATISFACTION WITH COMMUNITY COLLEGES.

- Community colleges help narrow the digital divide by providing computer skills to a substantial number of students.
- The cost of computers for education is a major problem for 20 percent of students.
- 28 percent of the noncredit students had already attained a bachelor's degree or higher.
- 60 percent of credit students responded that a major reason for taking classes at the community college was to "meet the requirements for my chosen occupation."
- 29 percent of the noncredit students who were unemployed and seeking work reported public assistance as a source of funds for their education.
- More than half of community college students are first-generation students.
- 83 percent of credit students responded that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their community college.

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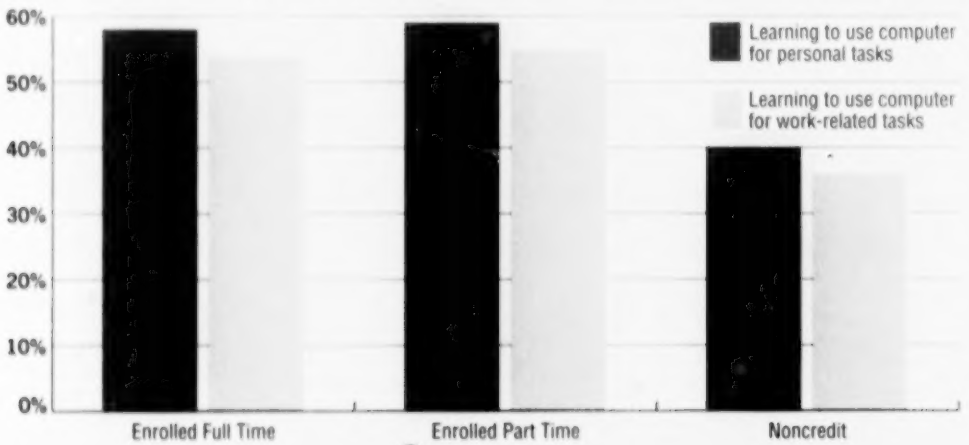
**FIGURE 1 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS REPORTING THAT THE COLLEGE PROVIDED A MODERATE TO MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO THEIR GROWTH IN COMPUTER SKILLS**



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## Introduction

Community colleges serve a diverse group of students who have a wide range of personal and professional needs and goals. This report examines some of the special populations that community colleges serve—including single parents, first-generation students, and students aged 40 or older—and highlights a key area of training provided by community colleges, information technology. More than 1 in 10 students (12 percent), for example, reported that they were training for a new career in an information technology–related field. Many of the responding students reported having recently had a major change in their lives. Overall, community college students of all ages and backgrounds reported growth in academic and workplace skills and are satisfied with most aspects of their community college experience.

## Background and Methodology

The American Association of Community Colleges and ACT, Inc., jointly conducted the first annual *Faces of the Future* survey. The study was conducted in credit and noncredit classrooms in fall 1999. More than 100,000 students at 245 community colleges in 41 states responded. Analysis of geographic location, college size, and urban/rural setting indicated that respondent colleges were generally representative of all community colleges. To adjust for minor discrepancies, ACT applied statistical weights to the credit data to more accurately reflect a national picture. (A brief methodology report is available upon request.)

Credit students are students enrolled in classes that can be applied toward a formal award conferred by the college, such as an associate degree or a certificate. Noncredit students are all respondent students who reported that they were taking at least one noncredit class. Noncredit classes generally cannot be applied toward gaining a degree or certificate granted by the college, although these classes are increasingly used to gain a certificate awarded by a vendor such as Microsoft, Novell, or Cisco Systems. The term *first-generation student* applies when neither of the student's parents attended college.

## Computer Skills: The Digital Divide

Through credit and noncredit offerings, community colleges help people learn or maintain skills critical in the information age, thus helping students bridge the gap in information skills frequently called the digital divide. For respondents seeking to gain computer and other information technology skills, community colleges are the provider of choice.

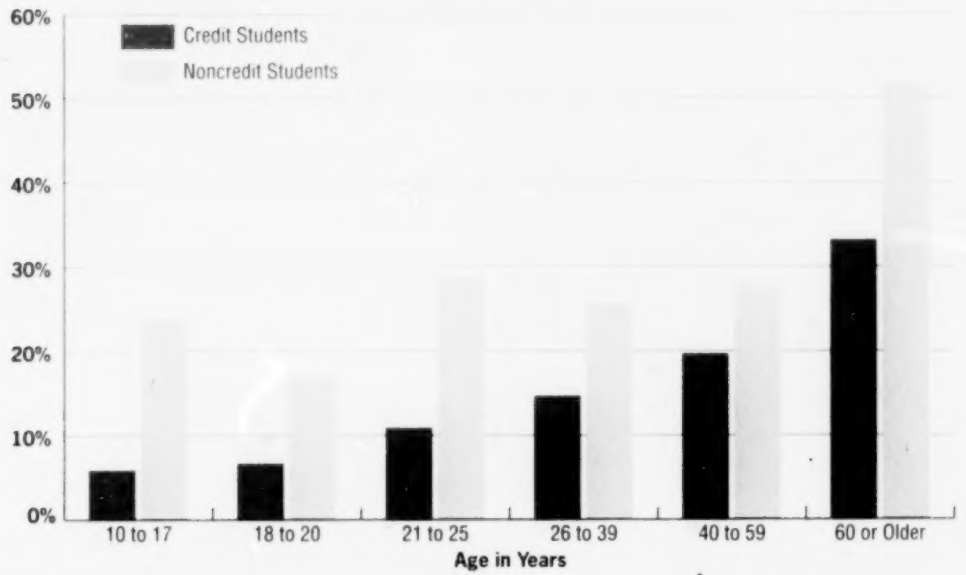
Twelve percent of the credit respondents—and 16 percent of credit students aged 40 to 59—training for a new career were doing so in a computer or communications-related field. Among all credit respondents, 18 percent stated that developing computer skills was a major reason for taking classes at the college. This was especially true for credit students who were first-generation students (23 percent), single parents (25 percent), or unemployed (24 percent). For one-third of the noncredit students aged 40 or older, gaining computer/technology skills was a major reason as well.

### Internet Experience

A significant percentage of survey respondents—11 percent of credit students and 30 percent of noncredit students—reported that they had never used the Internet. Certain groups of people were less likely to have Internet experience than others. Among credit students, one-third of the individuals aged 60 or older, and one-fifth of those between 40 and 59 years of age, had none (see figure 2). Twenty percent of the credit respondents who were single parents and 15 percent of those who were first-generation students had never used the Internet.

In the noncredit population, these trends were even stronger. More than 34 percent of unemployed students who were looking for work and 40 percent of the unemployed not seeking work had never used the Internet. (Students who reported that they were unemployed and not currently seeking work included such people as retirees and those

**FIGURE 2 PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS REPORTING THEY HAVE NEVER USED THE INTERNET**



taking care of a home full time.) More than 50 percent of the students aged 60 or older had never used the Internet, while only 17 percent of those aged 18 to 20 had never used the Internet (see figure 2).

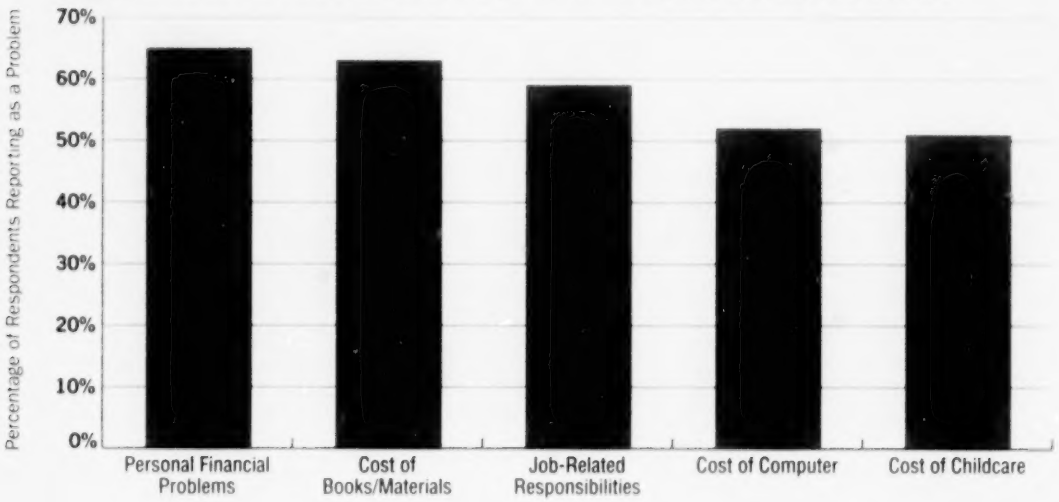
### Growth in Computer Skills

Nearly twenty percent of credit and noncredit respondents reported that their college experiences had been a major contribution in learning to use a computer for personal and work-related tasks. For credit students, this was true for nearly one-third of single parents and for more than a quarter of the first-generation students. Those aged 26 or older were more likely than others to report that the college was a major contributor in learning to use a computer for personal, rather than work-related, tasks. Among noncredit students aged 60 or older, 47 percent reported that the college had made a major contribution in helping them learn to use a computer for personal purposes.

### Cost of Computers

Although students took and benefited from computer-skills courses, the cost of a computer was consistently rated as one of the top five problems (out of 12) that students attending community college had—higher than transportation and health-related problems (see figure 3). Twenty percent of all credit students reported that the cost of a computer was a major problem. Included in that group of credit respondents were 28 percent of the students aged 26 to 39, 25 percent of the first-generation students, and 39 percent of the single parents.

**FIGURE 3 TOP-FIVE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING COLLEGE CLASSES**



## Diverse Student Population

Community colleges serve a diverse set of students. It is well documented, for instance, that community colleges serve a higher percentage of minority students than do any of the four-year college sectors. This section highlights various groups of students—such as students who already have degrees, single parents, first-generation students, and individuals aged 40 or older—and examines their reasons for attending community college. Those reasons range from gaining the skills required to enter or reenter today's competitive job markets to learning to use computers for personal tasks.

### Students with Degrees

More than one-quarter (28 percent) of the noncredit respondents had already attained a bachelor's degree or higher. One in 10 noncredit students had a master's degree or higher (see figure 4). Individuals with higher earned degrees were less likely than other students to report that they were taking classes for future or current job advancement. However, they were equally as likely as others to report that they were taking classes for computer-related skills. This emphasizes the fact that noncredit activities are serving the continuing, or lifelong, learning needs of this population. Among credit respondents, 8 percent of the students aged 26 to 39, 15 percent of those aged 40 to 59, and 36 percent of those aged 60 or older had a bachelor's degree or higher.

### Single Parents

Although single parents were only 7 percent of the credit sample, analysis of this group is striking. Fifty-one percent of the single-parent credit students reported household incomes below $20,000, compared with 18 percent for respondents overall. Twenty-nine percent of the single-parent credit students reported that public assistance was a source of funds for their education, compared with 9 percent for respondents overall (see figure 5). Seventy-three percent of single-parent credit students reported that financial aid was a very important source of funds, compared with 40 percent overall.

Responses to the survey from single-parent credit students also show that these students were particularly focused on obtaining skills necessary to enter the workforce. One-quarter reported that a major reason they were taking courses at this time was in response to a major life event. They reported experiencing within the past two years high rates of birth or adoption of a child (25 percent), or divorce or separation (32 percent). Eighty-four percent reported that being self-reliant was very important, compared with 69 percent of the total population. Although having a steady and

**FIGURE 4 HIGHEST DEGREE EARNED BY ENROLLMENT STATUS**

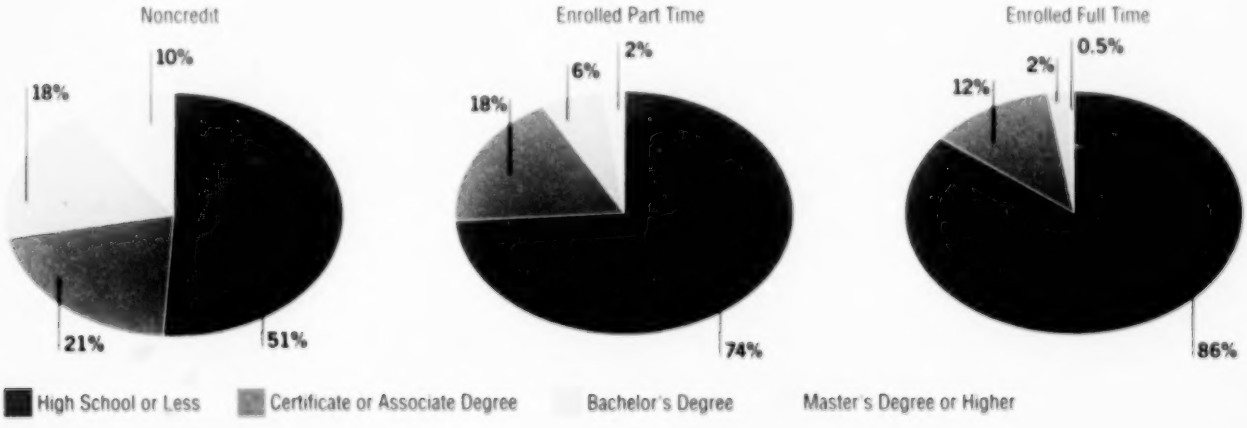
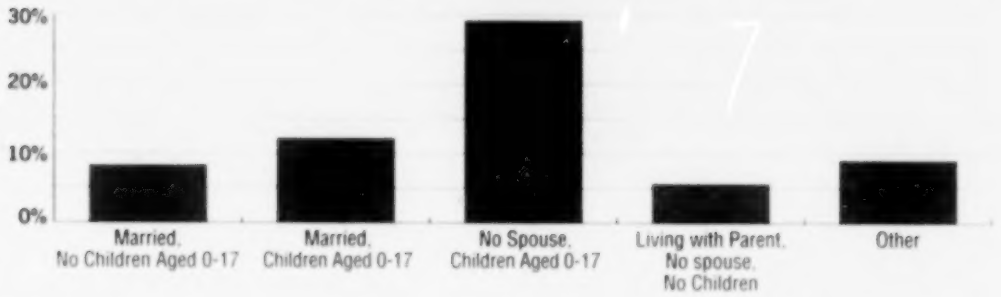


**FIGURE 5 PERCENTAGE OF CREDIT STUDENTS REPORTING PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AS A SOURCE OF FUNDS FOR TAKING CLASSES**




secure job was important to everyone in this survey, a higher percentage of single parents reported this as a very important goal.

Single parents in the noncredit sample were also focused on gaining workforce-specific skills for current and future jobs and reported a strong desire to develop self-reliance. As a result of their time at the community college, they reported significant growth in self-confidence, the ability to use personal computers, and soft skills—such as effective leadership skills—required in workplace settings.

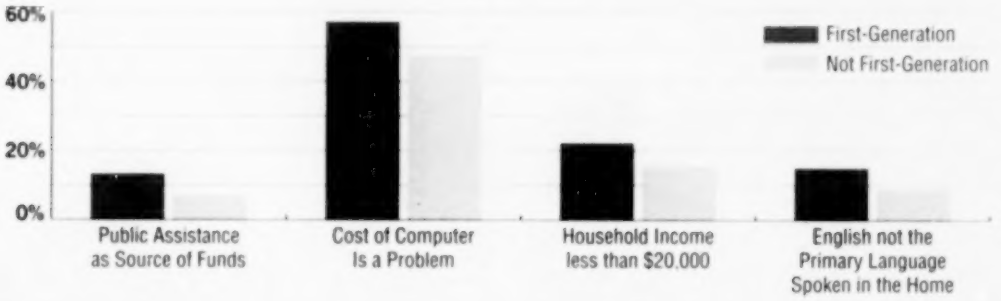
### First-Generation Students

If neither parent has had any postsecondary educational experience, a student is considered a first-generation student. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 60 percent of public community college students are first generation.

The survey reveals several general characteristics of first-generation students. Minority students were more likely to be first generation, as were older people and those for whom English is not the primary language spoken in the home. As shown in figure 6, 13 percent of first-generation students reported that at least some of the funds for college came from public assistance, and 22 percent reported household incomes of less than $20,000. Student financial aid was rated a very important source of funding for 48 percent of first-generation students, compared with 42 percent for all respondents. High school students taking community college classes were the least likely to be first-generation students.

First-generation students were more likely than others to be at the community college for reasons related to a current job, to develop computer skills (they were more likely to be victims of the digital divide than others), and to enter the workforce after a major life change. Members of this group were more likely to rate having a steady and

**FIGURE 6 CHARACTERISTICS OF FIRST-GENERATION AND NOT FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**



secure job as their primary goal. Other students were more likely to rate having time for family and friends as their primary goal.

### Students Aged 40 or Older

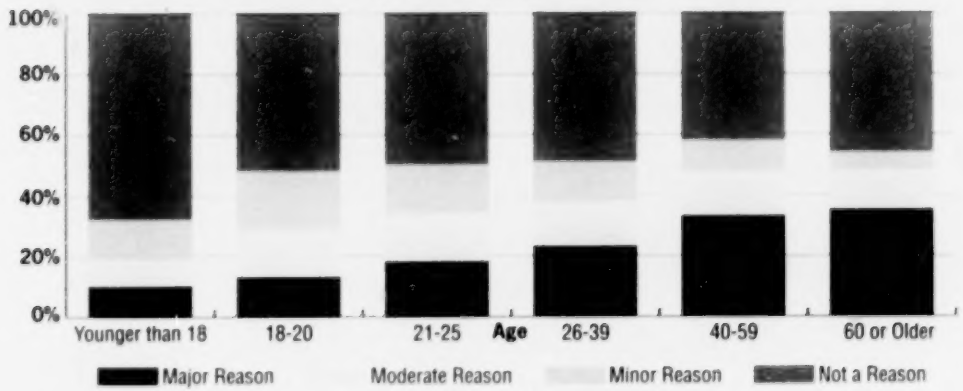
According to NCES data, students aged 40 or older composed 16 percent of the community college population in 1997, up from 12 percent in 1993. From the survey's data, it is apparent that community colleges are increasingly serving an older population. In fact, 4 percent of the credit population and approximately 5 percent of the noncredit population responding to this survey reported that they had retired in the last two years.

Not surprisingly, the older the students, the more likely they were to have greater job stability and higher levels of educational attainment, and the more likely they were to report their own income and an employer as the major sources for tuition funding. In fact, 39 percent of the credit respondents aged 60 or older had held the same job for more than 10 years. Although only 4 percent of credit respondents had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 15 percent of credit students aged 40 to 59 and 36 percent of those aged 60 or older had earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

Older credit students reported several reasons for attending community college. Half of credit students aged 26 to 59 stated that making a career change was a major reason for taking classes, and nearly one-quarter (23 percent, compared with 8 percent overall) said a significant life-change event was a major reason. Figure 7 shows that developing computer skills was important to roughly one-third of credit students aged 40 or older, and more than a third stated that the college was a major contributor in learning to use the computer for personal tasks (compared with one-fifth in the overall population). In fact, students in this age range were more likely than others to report that they were taking classes for personal enrichment. Compared with 18- to 39-year-olds, who identified a steady and secure job as their highest-rated goal, students aged 40 or older were more likely to rate spending time with family as their most important goal and self-reliance as their second most important goal. (Self-reliance was rated third most important for all other age groups.).

The noncredit population displayed a much broader distribution of ages than did the credit population, a reflection of the wide variety of noncredit programming offered by community colleges: from training contracted directly by business and industry, to computer training, to personal-enrichment courses, to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and general educational development (GED) courses. One in 10 (11 percent) of the noncredit students were over the age of 60, more than one-third (36 percent) were between the ages

**FIGURE 7 PERCENTAGE OF CREDIT STUDENTS REPORTING THEY ARE TAKING CLASSES TO DEVELOP COMPUTER/TECHNOLOGY SKILLS**



of 40 and 59, and less than 15 percent were under the age of 21.

Noncredit students aged 40 or older were more likely than others to take classes for personal enrichment, while younger students were more likely to take classes for career-related reasons. (Individuals aged 21 to 25 were more likely than others—14 percent compared to 10 percent overall—to state that a major reason for taking classes was because their employer required them to do so. These students were likely to be in contract training classes offered through their employer.) A major reason for attending for one-third of the noncredit students aged 40 or older was to gain computer/technology skills. Forty-seven percent of noncredit students aged 60 or older reported that the college had made a major contribution in helping them learn to use a computer for personal purposes.

## Growth and Satisfaction While at the College

Survey respondents were asked to indicate how much their experiences at the community college contributed to the growth of various academic and workplace skills. Credit students consistently indicated that their experiences at the college contributed the most growth in "increasing my academic competence" and "learning skills needed specifically for my current or future job." The next three highest areas of growth reported were "identifying the training and skills required for career opportunities that fit my interests and abilities," "enriching my intellectual life," and "developing self-confidence." This pattern was mirrored in the noncredit population, with the exception that increased academic competence was not as highly rated as growth in workplace skills.

When asked, "in general, how satisfied are you with this college," 83 percent of the credit students responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied. Less than 3 percent of the credit students responded that they were at all dissatisfied. The noncredit population was even more satisfied, with 88 percent responding that they were satisfied or very satisfied, and less than 2 percent responding that they were dissatisfied.

The pattern of responses on the more specific satisfaction questions indicated that the students tended to be most satisfied with the campus-climate aspects of the college. For example, students felt that instructors respected people's gender and race, and they felt secure at the college. Satisfaction with academic aspects followed campus climate in the ratings. Less highly rated were the student-services aspects of the college, including items such as the quality of academic advising and assistance from the financial aid office. In general, the noncredit population rated everything more satisfactory than did the credit students (more than 70 percent of noncredit respondents agree or strongly agree with the satisfaction items). Additionally, satisfaction responses increased with age, older students being more likely to be satisfied with the various aspects of the college.

**Further reports from the Faces of the Future survey will be available in coming months.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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